

# United Service

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## **The People's Liberation Army Navy**

Although China's recent naval modernisation has substantially improved China's naval capabilities, I do not know whether anybody outside the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of China and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) itself knows what process the Chinese use in deciding how big a navy it will have and what it should comprise. The conventional western approach is to attempt to chart a path to some future date, come up with projections based on guesses of what will be around then as problems and issues for the national security, and try to counter them as far as the budget will allow by building new capability. It is a messy process which has rarely worked well; we always seem to get too many ships of the wrong kind and not enough of anything really appropriate. In the parlance of my day, it was called 'come as you are warfare'.

I do not believe the Chinese are any smarter than others attempting this calculation. One might suggest that, because we in the West have gained a lot of experience in guessing the future through continuous successive attempts to do so, we might even have a slight edge. Our governmental systems do not ascribe any infallibility to the political party elected to office or to the head of government, as those of China do. On the contrary, in our societies, decisions on military equipment are subjected to all kinds of critical appraisal and comment – some of which might be illuminating – which does not occur in China.

China does not need all the ships it is building to defend its coastline (against what threat?), so they either envisage blocking the seaward approaches to East Asia with serried ranks of frigates and corvettes as an attrition force against an enemy on the attack (the World War II Japanese had similar views) or they are planning on sending them off around the world to do mischief elsewhere.

Of the first supposition, this is a bit like the English defence against the Spanish Armada in 1588. It worked then because the Spanish had lost the strategic initiative by needing to pick up an invading army in Flanders before attacking Britain. The English also had better ships and better armament served by well-trained people, their supply lines were shorter and they had cut their teeth on fighting the Spaniards. Even so, it was a closer-run thing than we now believe. Of the

second supposition, expeditionary warfare is a tough problem, which needs lots of practice and really good logistic support (which the Armada also lacked).

But if President-for-life Xi has taken 'expert' advice and come up with a naval order of battle which he and his colleagues believe will make China the leading world power by 2050, then that is what the minions will be working on. The problem is that the ships they are building now will be razor blades by the time 2050 rolls round. And if there is any sure-fire way of completely distorting a Defence budget, then building aircraft carriers is a competitive contender. Deng Xiaoping had the right idea – 'Bide your time, hide your strength'. Build a small number of good ships, work hard on improving their capability incrementally while training lots of sailors in making them efficient, and then tool up to mass produce them when the time comes to do so.

Finally, I do not believe anybody in the PLA or the Politburo has any plans for fighting the United States. It is not a matter of whether USS *Dogpatch* can defeat PLAN *Dongfeng* in an arm wrestle at sea. It is rather a question of how much nuclear punishment the nation and economy might have to absorb if push came to shove. Oh yes; and the number of people you can afford to lose in the exchange. If there is a massive increase in bunker building in China, then we have a real problem to confront.

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